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ABSTRACT

Everything in education begins with reading because children who cannot read, cannot learn. All that people strive to know is advanced by strong literacy skills. In pursuit of this vision, the Ohio State Board of Education advocates a comprehensive statewide initiative that builds and improves all students' literacy skills by: (1) raising and clarifying literacy expectations for all children; (2) engaging parents and communities in the education of their children, because literacy education is not simply the responsibility of teachers; (3) aligning expectations for student performance with the state's assessment and accountability systems; and (4) developing the capacity of teachers, schools and school districts to meet these expectations, and ensuring they have the authority and flexibility required to get the job done. This strategy is both comprehensive and connected, and represents a basic primer for building all Ohioans' literacy skills for successful lives. (EF)

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Our Children Cannot Wait

Literacy Skills for Successful Lives

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Literacy Skills for Successful Lives

THE STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION'S LITERACY VISION

Every Ohioan will have access to effective literacy education.

Special attention and resources will be devoted to ensure that all students are able to read and write during the foundation-building years of pre-kindergarten through grade four.

Every child from pre-kindergarten through high school will read at grade level or higher.

Every high school graduate will have the oral and written communication skills essential for learning in the classroom and beyond.

All Ohioans will master the core literacy skills that are the foundation for successful and productive lives.

Ohio's children cannot wait.

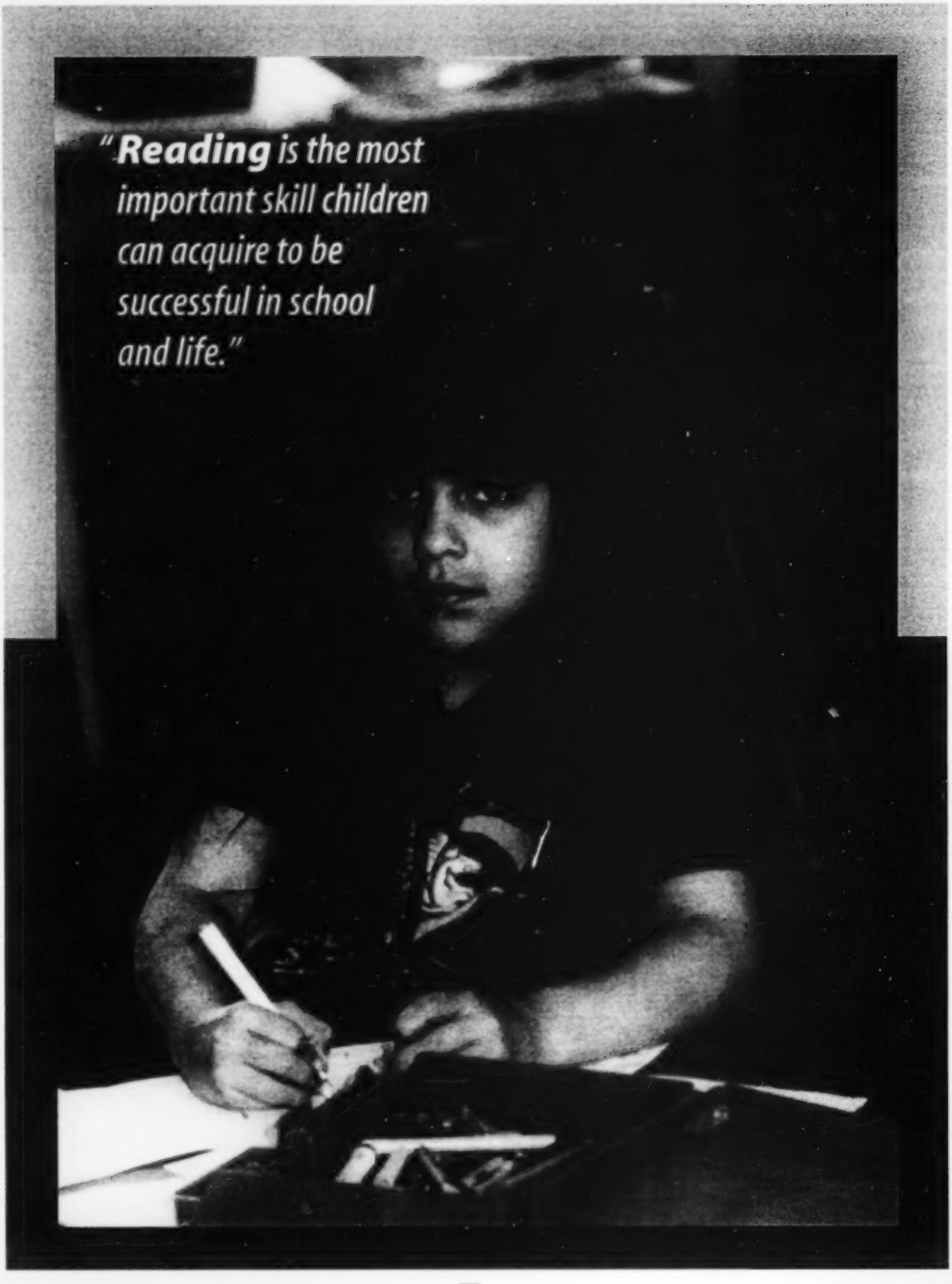
Nothing is more fundamental to learning than reading.

The most basic responsibility of schools and communities is teaching students to read. Indeed, the future success of all students hinges upon their ability to become proficient readers.

Everything in education begins with reading because children who cannot read, cannot learn. All that we strive to know is advanced by strong literacy skills. Students who cannot read, write and communicate with others cannot achieve at the highest possible levels – in the classroom or beyond.

In pursuit of this vision, the State Board of Education advocates for a comprehensive statewide initiative that builds and improves all students' literacy skills by:

- Raising and clarifying our literacy expectations for all children.
- Engaging parents and communities in the education of their children, because literacy education is not simply the responsibility of teachers.
- Aligning our expectations for student performance with the state's assessment and accountability systems.
- Developing the capacity of teachers, schools and school districts to meet these expectations, and ensuring they have the authority and flexibility required to get the job done.


"**Reading** is the most important skill children can acquire to be successful in school and life."

Ohio's Literacy Challenge

Reading is the most important skill children can acquire to be successful in school and life. No other skill contributes more to academic success in all subject areas.

Learning to read is neither natural nor easy. To acquire this skill, most students begin reading through an intensive process including regular exposure to interesting books and comprehensive discussions of texts and meaning. The process also calls for skilled teachers who help students unlock and enliven words, which build overall knowledge and enhance problem-solving abilities.

Reading and other literacy skills demand the full attention of educators, parents, business and community leaders, and policy makers. A lack of literacy skills contributes to academic failure, dropout rates and poor career and life prospects. The National Institute for Literacy reports that 43 percent of the people with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty; 17 percent receive food stamps; and 70 percent have no job or are employed part time.

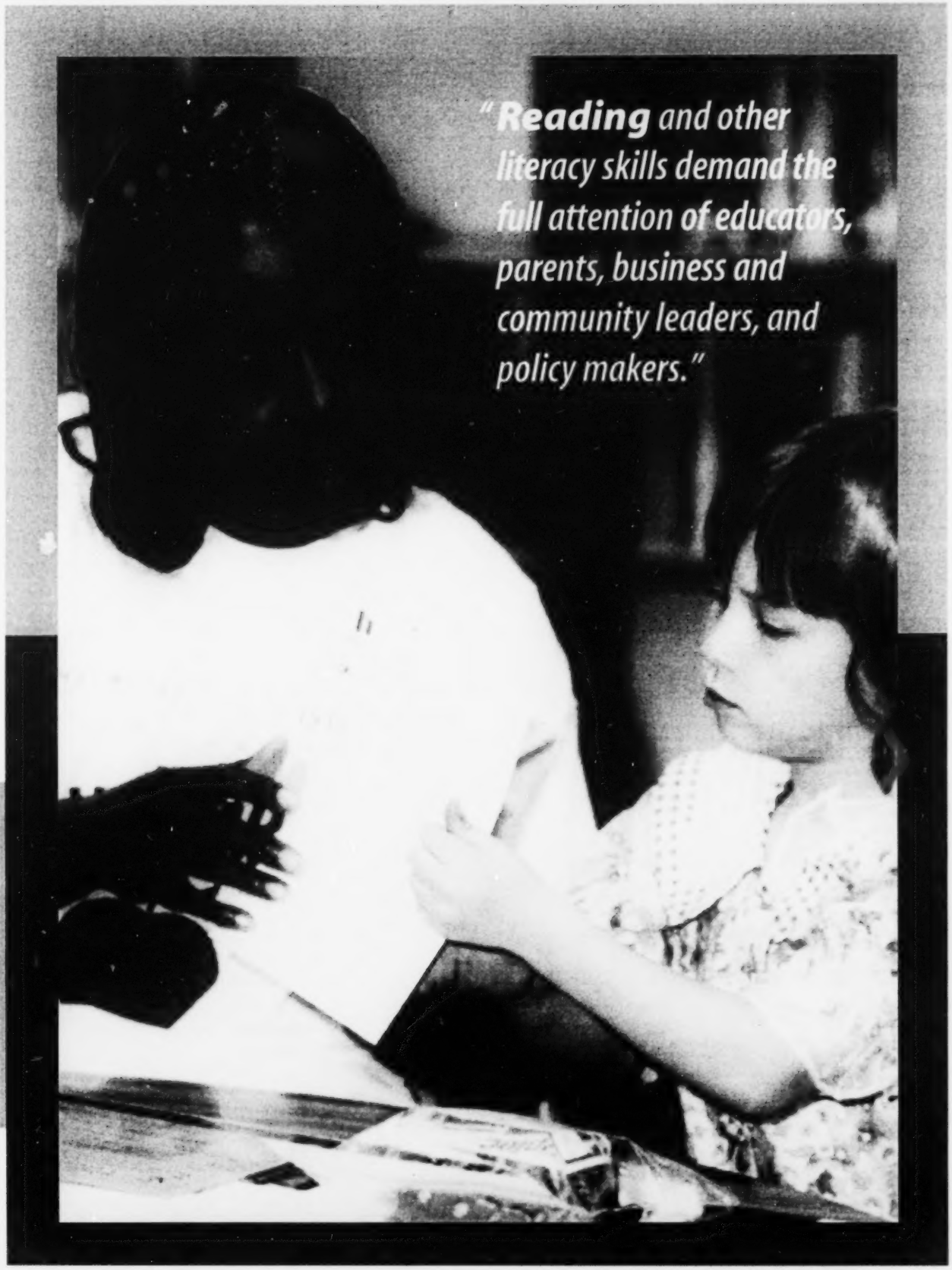
In 1999, 40 percent of Ohio's fourth-graders did not pass the reading portion of the fourth-grade proficiency test. This means that 50,000 Ohio fourth-graders did not meet established performance standards. They could not read at grade level. Most of these children are living in poor rural and urban communities.

Concerns about the literacy levels of Ohio students are not new. A recent study conducted jointly by the Ohio Department of Education and Ohio Business Roundtable found that only one in 14 Ohio high school seniors had the "foundational skills" to secure and succeed in today's most promising entry-level jobs.

Research findings like these compelled the Ohio General Assembly to enact the Fourth-Grade Reading Guarantee in 1997. This law, which becomes fully effective during the 2001-2002 school year, requires:

- Evaluating all students' reading skills at the end of the first, second, third and fourth grades;
- Providing remediation or other intensified reading services to all students who are struggling to read at the end of the third grade;
- Administering the Ohio Fourth-Grade Reading Proficiency Test to all fourth-graders – two additional times to those who have not yet passed the test; and
- Retaining any fourth-grade student who fails to pass the reading proficiency test, unless (1) the child is a student with a disability whose Individualized Education Plan excuses him or her from taking the tests, or (2) the student's principal and reading teacher agree that he or she is academically prepared for the fifth grade.

The State Board is committed to an Ohio where every child reads at grade level or higher; where all students develop the oral and written communication skills essential for learning; and where all citizens master the core literacy skills that are the foundation for successful and productive lives.


"Reading and other literacy skills demand the full attention of educators, parents, business and community leaders, and policy makers."

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Building Literacy for Successful Lives

A Statewide Strategy

The State Board of Education supports our state leaders' emphasis on reading and literacy skills. It believes that literacy is a core skill that should be extended to every Ohio learner, and it is committed to a comprehensive literacy program that ensures that every child can read, write, listen and speak effectively.

The State Board supports Governor Bob Taft's **OhioReads** initiative, which promotes partnerships among schools, parents, community organizations, businesses, libraries and students to improve reading skills. This initiative helps raise Ohio's literacy expectations for all students. It also strengthens the capacity of teachers and schools to help all children meet these expectations.

Ohio needs a comprehensive literacy initiative – an all-out, failure-will-not-be-tolerated strategy – to ensure that all students develop the reading and other literacy skills that will permit them to achieve, in the classroom and beyond, at the highest possible levels. Toward this end we need to begin:

R aising and clarifying our expectations for all students.

E ngaging parents and communities in the education of their children, because literacy education is not simply the responsibility of teachers.

A ligning our expectations for student performance with the state's assessment and accountability systems.

D eveloping the capacity of teachers, schools and school districts to meet these expectations, and ensure they have the authority and flexibility required to get the job done.

Raising and Clarifying Our Expectations

ACTION 1 Clearly define and articulate literacy expectations for all students, teachers and schools.

The State Board believes that every level of Ohio's education system – state, district, school, classroom and community – should make literacy the Number One priority. And literacy expectations – identifying what students should know and be able to do by the time they finish each grade – should be clearly defined and communicated to all education stakeholders.

What constitutes "reading at grade level?" Today, Ohio's students, teachers and parents need well-defined expectations for what students should be able to read and understand at each grade level. What books should they be able to read and understand? At what grade should students be able to interpret and draw inferences from what they read? What vocabulary skills should students be able to master at specific grade levels?

Those expectations must be communicated widely in plain language so children and their parents as well as educators, business and community leaders can understand them.

ACTION 2 Complete the Joint Council's work to set "common expectations" for all high school graduates, and match classroom instruction with the state's literacy expectation.

The Joint Council established by the State Board of Education and the Ohio Board of Regents is working to establish a set of "common expectations" for what every student should know and be able to do upon completion of high school. This is an important initiative that reaches beyond the identification of core competencies in six academic areas and in technology.

This effort will define "exit expectations" for all Ohio high school seniors in English language arts, including reading, writing, listening and speaking. With the concurrence of the State Board, the Council also is developing fourth- and eighth-grade "benchmarks" that measure students' progress toward meeting the common expectations.

Curriculum and formal instruction must consistently line up with these literacy expectations. For example, using the draft common expectations and benchmarks developed by the Joint Council, students should be able to:

GRADE 4

- Read a variety of fiction, nonfiction and poetry books.
- Summarize, evaluate and analyze text.
- Compare and contrast various features of texts.
- Differentiate between fact and opinion, and draw inferences.
- Produce various kinds of writing (e.g., journals, learning logs, poems and reports).
- Write ideas in an organized, sequential manner.
- Deliver oral presentations using appropriate language.
- Demonstrate active and appropriate listening skills.

GRADE 8

- Complete oral and written responses, connecting new concepts to prior knowledge.
- Select and read a wide variety of books (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, classic and contemporary).
- Analyze and synthesize ideas and themes in texts.
- Produce various kinds of formal and informal writing (e.g., stories, reports, biographies, letters and notes).
- Draft, revise and edit writing independently and with teacher or peer support.
- Prepare, organize and practice for public speaking activities.
- Broaden knowledge of language and cultural differences through listening.

GRADE 12

- Read a wide variety of complete works of texts (e.g., literature, nonfiction, work-related documents and multimedia presentations).
- Analyze and respond to what has been read, orally and in writing.
- Use reference materials and other resources to find and synthesize information.
- Produce writing for a variety of purposes and audiences.
- Listen attentively during oral readings and presentations.

Building on the work of the Joint Council, the State Board believes that similar literacy expectations need to be established at each grade level. The expectations might include:

- In kindergarten, students should understand how spoken sounds connect to words, recognize and write each alphabet letter, and understand stories and information.
- In Grade 1, students should be able to learn and practice sounds to develop speaking and spelling skills, recognize printed words, and read books independently at the appropriate level.
- In Grades 2 and 3, students should be able to sound out unfamiliar words while reading stories and information, comprehend content, develop an appropriate flow of reading, and identify key story elements (e.g., characters, setting, problem/solution).

The Joint Council is working to link the new competencies to the admissions practices and policies of Ohio's colleges and universities, identify how teacher education programs will need to be changed to support the new competencies, and engage the public in the development of Ohio's new "common expectations."

Engaging Parents and Communities

ACTION 1

Create new learning opportunities at the preschool level, and ensure that they are aligned with our literacy expectations for three- to four-year olds.

Tens of thousands of Ohio three- and four-year-olds are enrolled in Head Start, private and public preschool or similar programs. These early care settings can afford young children the chance to begin to learn to read. Many of these programs offer their own reading readiness curriculum. More progress is needed to integrate preschool reading readiness goals with those of the public schools. Therefore:

- The State Board supports the expansion of learning opportunities during preschool years by extending access to early education and childcare services to more families. This expansion can rely on existing childcare assistance programs, as well as new federal and private grant dollars. The Board also strives to ensure that early childhood services are rendered by skilled adults who understand how children learn to read. That is why this effort will be undertaken in partnership with state and local human services departments and early childhood associations.

ACTION 2

Educate all parents about early learning.

The State Board believes that greater emphasis should be given to educating parents about the importance of early learning, and about the resources that are available to help their children become proficient in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Thus, Board members are committed to parent academies, workshops and other services that:

- Educate parents on the literacy expectations public schools hold for their children;
- Help parents understand the value of periodic assessments that measure their children's progress in developing basic literacy skills;
- Familiarize parents with the interventions and intensified learning opportunities that are available to their children; and
- Give parents information about what they can do to help their children learn to read and acquire other literacy skills.

ACTION 3 Offer family literacy services.

The State Board is committed to Even Start and other family literacy programs designed to prevent reading difficulties before kindergarten. Even Start can produce sustainable improvements in an entire family's literacy skills with its combination of services: interactive literacy activities between parents and children; training for parents as the primary teachers for their children; Adult Basic Literacy Education; and early childhood education.

Board members also agree with local schools' efforts to link children to needed health, mental health, nutrition and social services. A primary cause of school failure is absenteeism. Community service providers can help children and families stay healthy and productive, while schools stay focused on learning.

One way to strengthen family access to community services is to place caseworkers in the schools. The State Board encourages all schools – especially those in Academic Emergency – to explore partnerships with health and social service providers and make school-based or school-linked services accessible to the children who need them.

ACTION 4 Promote OhioReads and other initiatives designed to develop communities' capacity to support reading.

Volunteer tutors read to children, supervise practice in reading aloud, and talk with children to develop speaking skills. Well-trained and supervised volunteers can expand children's opportunities for encouragement and practice of reading. Therefore, the State Board supports initiatives to engage business, public libraries and community organizations in literacy activities. Businesses should develop policies that support parental involvement in schools.

ACTION 5 Increase the state's investment in Adult Basic Education.

Twenty-five percent of adults in this country lack the basic literacy skills required in a typical job. This shocking fact reminds us that literacy education cannot be limited to the elementary grades, or for that matter, to the K-12 curriculum. In today's literate world, academic success, employment opportunities and personal autonomy depend on reading and writing proficiency. So the State Board urges schools and communities to join together for the purpose of expanding their Adult Basic Education initiatives, and it supports increased state funding for such efforts.

Aligning Assessment and Accountability Systems with Our Expectations

ACTION 1

Ensure that Ohio's reading and other literacy skill assessments are aligned with the state's expectations.

In March 1999, Achieve, Inc. urged Ohio's education policy leaders to establish a set of clear, specific and measurable academic standards – that describe the knowledge as well as the skills the state expects its students to master. These standards also become the bar against which curriculum, assessment, and professional development can be aligned. Achieve described the challenge in these words:

> "Ohio must bring its proficiency testing program into alignment with whatever new sets of standards it develops."

The State Board of Education believes it is critical that Ohio aligns its proficiency test with clear standards. This is why Board members support the proposed agenda of the Governor's Commission for Student Success, with its emphasis on improving alignment among the state's academic expectations, assessment and accountability systems.

Board members' commitment to bring the state's proficiency tests into alignment with its expectations for students' academic performance also is reflected in their support for the work of the Joint Council, as described earlier in this vision document.

ACTION 2 Reinforce reading for all ages.

The State Board recognizes that the fourth grade certainly is not the end of literacy education. We cannot afford to help young people clear the initial hurdle, only to let them stumble and fall in higher grades. Therefore, Board members support transitional reading and dropout prevention programs at the middle school and high school levels in all districts, especially those with higher dropout rates.

ACTION 3 Ensure that accountability measures are fully aligned with reading expectations and assessments.

The State Board supports an accountability system that puts responsibility for learning and improving not just on students, but also on the adults who prepare them. Students in the fourth grade can be retained if they fail the reading proficiency test. High school seniors cannot graduate without passing the ninth-grade proficiency tests. In both cases, the penalties and rewards fall squarely on the student, not teachers, principals or the district as a whole.

Board members believe that Ohio must develop a system that looks at the relationship between the work of educators and administrators and students' progress. Ohio's accountability system must evaluate the performance of educators and administrators, at least in part, based upon the academic performance of students. (The Board's commitment to match this accountability with support for educators should be noted. See next section: Developing the Capacity of Teachers, Schools and Districts.)

Board members also are committed to the Ohio Department of Education's efforts to develop a new report card accountability system, through which it can begin to monitor and assist districts that need improvement. Report cards should measure district performance on a year-to-year basis. The new system should reward and celebrate districts' improvements, and it should provide assistance to low performing districts.

Developing the Capacity of Teachers, Schools and Districts

ACTION 1 Develop and use a common assessment of early language and literacy skills.

Recent scientific studies have given us a better understanding of how literacy develops, why some children have difficulty, and what constitutes best instructional practice. Today, we know more than ever before about effective reading instruction. And, we know that once behind in reading, few children catch up unless they receive intensive individualized and expert instruction.

From educational and brain research, we have found new ways to help children become proficient readers. Education stakeholders must join together to ensure that all teachers, schools and districts have access to this knowledge. The State Board of Education agrees. If we assess student skill levels early, in grades K-3, we have the chance to intervene and improve each child's reading performance before fourth-grade testing begins. Early testing identifies potential problem areas and helps map a strategy for improvement.

Therefore, the State Board supports the development and statewide use of a common literacy assessment tool that allows every school and district to evaluate its students' reading progress in grades K-3, and to notify parents of the results of these assessments.

These evaluations should have predictive validity for students' likely performance on the fourth-grade reading test. With this predictive information, teachers and parents can understand better why students are not performing well and can identify specific areas (e.g., writing, comprehension, or vocabulary) where students need help.

While Board members believe that this common assessment should be used by all school districts, policy makers may want to consider encouraging all districts to use it, but requiring its use only by school districts in "Academic Emergency" or "Academic Watch."

ACTION 2 Step up early intervention efforts.

The State Board believes that all districts must offer intensified instruction and other intervention services by highly trained individuals for students who are behind in the development of basic literacy skills. Local districts should be able to select the method and type of intensified instruction from an approved list of options.

The Ohio Department of Education stands ready to assist local schools in developing comprehensive intervention and remediation, which may consist of before- and after-school programs, community mentors and tutors inside and outside the classroom, and summer learning efforts that offer the support of year-round schooling.

To date, the Department has helped establish model summer and after-school care programs through its Urban School Age Child Care Initiative. Board members believe that the Department of Education should work closely with the Department of Human Services to secure federal grant dollars to help continue the effort. They also believe the principles that made these models successful, such as simplified enrollment for families and nutrition services and recreational activities for children, should be adopted by districts to the greatest extent possible. Such steps not only increase participation among children and families, they act as magnets for matching private funding.

ACTION 3 Establish an Individualized Student Learning Plan for each student.

In addition to the early identification of special needs, the State Board believes that enriched learning experiences should be offered to students who need more academic challenges, as well as those who need intervention. Since each child is an individual with varying abilities and needs, the State Board believes that each student needs an Individualized Reading Plan that contains data on his or her standardized test scores, maps progress in the basic skills, and identifies special areas of knowledge, interests and learning problems. Board members believe that reading and other literacy skills should be given priority in the development and use of Individualized Student Learning Plans.

ACTION 4 Develop the capacity of schools to support reading.

All school districts' reading curriculum should reflect the state's literacy expectations, as well as its assessment framework. Checkpoints should be developed to help students, parents and teachers compare students' progress with national and state benchmarks – and to assure that all children can read, regardless of their background.

Toward this end, the State Board supports the development of reading curriculum guidelines, which will be prepared and shared with districts along with methods for effectively teaching, such as:

- keeping students and teachers together for more than one year;
- employing effective student grouping practices; and
- reducing class sizes in the primary grades.

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Board members also encourage the Department of Education to provide training about standards-based literacy issues for teachers, administrators and local boards of education. In addition, Board members believe that schools should have access to the latest and most appropriate technology for reading instruction. Computers and software programs promote individualized skill teaching, as children select those topic areas that exercise their weaker skills. Technology also can help reach children who do not respond as well to traditional classroom settings, giving them yet another alternative path to learning.

ACTION 5

Strengthen Teacher Preparation

All teachers – particularly at the elementary and middle school levels – should be proficient in literacy development. They should be skilled in preventing reading difficulties, using intervention and remediation techniques, and providing accelerated or intensified reading instruction.

All teachers should be prepared to answer questions about:

- Language structure: How can teachers help children with confusing sounds and letters, such as b and d? How can words, such as defeated, be broken down meaningfully for students?
- Practical teaching skills: What is a good speed for a second- or third-grader to read? When a child is reading, at what points should a teacher interrupt to discuss meaning or new vocabulary?
- Assessment of classroom reading and writing skills: What specific skills in a first-grader are good predictors of future reading success? Which is more reliable for gauging reading ability – oral reading or a diagnostic skill inventory?

Toward this end, the State Board believes that beginning teachers should be paired with mentor teachers who have documented success in teaching reading and improving student reading proficiency and enjoyment. Board members also support efforts to:

- Establish partnerships between schools and universities to ensure an alignment between what teachers learn in school and what they later teach in the classroom. Consistency among university preparation programs, state expectations for essential skills and knowledge, and teacher licensing standards will cut down on contradictory learning experiences for all.
- Examine new roles needed to improve the initial preparation and the continuing development of teachers, and create new roles for practicing teachers as teacher educators.

ACTION 6

Increase Teacher Licensing Requirements

The State Board believes that state requirements for a teaching license should place greater emphasis on literacy development, including language development related to literacy, comprehension, and the use of assessment tools to guide instructional techniques. It supports efforts to ensure that new licensure requirements are reflected in the content and quality of all higher education programs in Ohio that prepare teachers for the classroom.

Board members also support efforts to:

- Define the knowledge and abilities that are important for the effective delivery of comprehensive reading instruction. These standards should form the basis for preparation programs and the assessments used for teacher licensing. Furthermore, professional development for educators should be consistent with these standards to move teachers toward becoming master teachers.

Curriculum for the teaching profession should include:

- Psychology and development of reading;
- Language structure, focusing on instructional content;
- Reading instruction best practices; and
- Classroom assessments to guide teaching instruction.

- Require that all new teachers pass a test confirming their competence as teachers of reading. Such a test will be available from the Educational Testing Service as early as Fall 2001.

ACTION 7

Deepen Teachers' Content Knowledge

Steps are being taken to expand teachers' capacity to engage all children in reading through institutes for teachers and literacy leadership training for elementary principals. Now, teachers team with literacy specialists who can observe and assess classroom performance, offering feedback that improves overall reading instruction based upon effective reading instructional techniques.

To advance these initiatives, the State Board supports efforts to:

- Provide incentives for higher education faculty and staff developers to keep abreast of advances in fields such as linguistics and developmental psychology;
- Ensure that validated instructional programs are available to all teachers, and that they have access to high quality training in reading development, language structure and related subjects; and
- Target state funds to those professional development programs that meet criteria for quality, effectiveness and alignment with state expectations for essential skills and knowledge.

Conclusion

The State Board of Education believes that we know how to help students acquire basic literacy skills. We have proven instructional techniques and solid curriculum support. And, educational research continues building our knowledge of the best literacy education practices.

We know how to help teachers teach and students learn. We know the importance of engaging parents and communities in the education of their children. What we have not done, until now, is develop and use a comprehensive approach to literacy education.

The State Board is committed to an Ohio where every child reads at grade level or higher; where all students develop the oral and written communication skills essential for learning; and where all citizens master the core literacy skills that are the foundation for successful and productive lives.

The Board seeks a far-reaching statewide strategy, one based on well-defined and widely understood expectations for all students, assessment and accountability systems that are aligned with these expectations, and resources targeted to those activities that will make the biggest difference in students' literacy education.

Board members are determined to achieve a statewide agreement on the literacy results that Ohioans want to attain. They see the strategy outlined in this document as both comprehensive and connected. It represents the Board's basic primer for building all Ohioans' literacy skills for successful lives.

Not all great minds think alike, or learn alike. But they all can learn.

"The State Board of Education believes that literacy is a core skill that should be extended to every Ohio learner, and it is committed to a comprehensive literacy program that ensures that every child can read, write, listen and speak effectively."

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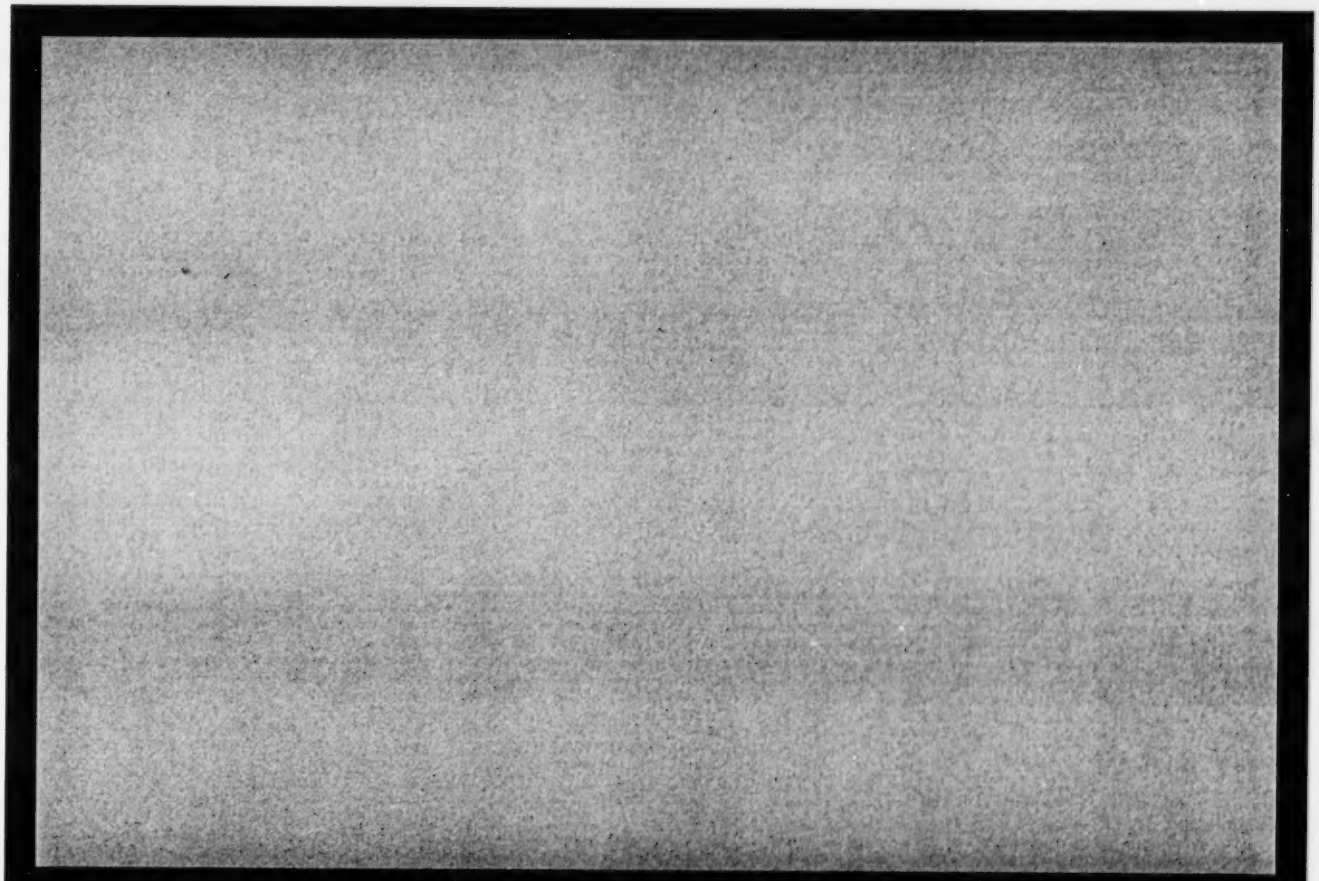

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